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Addendum to "The mystery of Mitchill's monster"

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Abstract - New information about Mitchill's monster is added to what was published previously (Greenfield, 2023a). The claim that the specimen was housed at the University of North Carolina is investigated. Its possible connection with modern shark sightings is also examined.

The monster at the University of North Carolina?

Parramore (1969) alleged that the monster was found in 1816, taken to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), and used by Professor Elisha Mitchell in his lectures there. While this is a tantalizing indication that some part could have survived, it is unfortunately incorrect. Mitchell never mentioned the monster in his works on the geology and paleontology of North Carolina, even though he noted fossils from the Meherrin River at Murfreesboro (Mitchell, 1827; 1828; 1829; 1842). It would be unexpected to exclude such a significant specimen from that very locality if he really taught with it. Parramore is the only author to have linked it to Mitchell and UNC, and he did not cite any sources. He most likely misinterpreted an article from the November 22, 1816, issue of the New York City *National Advocate* (Anon., 1816a). It described a presentation of the monster by Samuel L. Mitchill for his natural history class. He was named simply as 'Dr. Mitchill', which some reprints misspelled 'Dr. Mitchell' (e.g., Anon., 1816b). The location was not stated therein, but a course schedule from the same month and newspaper reveals it was the College of Physicians and Surgeons (Anon., 1816c). It seems that these ambiguities caused Parramore to confuse Mitchill for Mitchell and wrongly assume the event took place at UNC. Although the article has no extra details about the monster's anatomy or provenance, it provides a concrete date by which it had been discovered. That date lines up with Mitchill's acknowledgement that his account was already

written in 1817 (Mitchill et al., 1817), despite not being released until 1818.

The monster and modern shark sightings

In 1834, paleontologist Richard Harlan became the first to assign the monster to a genus/species (Harlan, 1834). He identified it as a species of giant shark related to the genus *Carcharias*. At that time, *Carcharias* was a wastebasket taxon containing sand tiger, great white, and requiem sharks (see White et al., 1961 for its history). Whether he intended to compare the monster to all of them or a certain one is unclear. The next year, an encounter with a huge shark was reported by Henry Piddington, a sea captain and acquaintance of Harlan's (Piddington, 1835). It happened in December 1816 in Mariveles Bay, Philippines. He was commanding a small ship that was anchored when he saw a white shape with prominent black spots passing underneath. He mistook it for a coral or sand bank, before being told by his men that it was a so-called *chacon*, a type of shark. He estimated that it was 70–80 feet long and 30 feet wide. Some of the sailors went into another boat and harpooned the animal, but it pulled them so quickly they cut the line out of fear. Piddington was inspired to come forward two decades later by Lieutenant William Foley's sighting, published earlier in the same year and journal (Foley, 1835). He similarly observed a large, spotted fish off the coast of Madras (now Chennai), India in May 1834. Gudger (1918) initially recognized both culprits as whale sharks, which has been accepted by subsequent authors (e.g., Wolfson & Notarbartolo di Sciara, 1981).

Piddington's description does not exactly match this species, yet he was self-admittedly nearsighted and probably misjudged the coloration and size. Additionally, *chacon* is attested elsewhere as a Filipino name for whale sharks (e.g., Herre, 1932). However, Piddington proposed an alternative candidate for what he and Foley witnessed. He had recently been sent a copy of Harlan's paper by Harlan himself. Using that information, he suggested that ancient sharks akin to the monster might still be roaming the oceans. This is noteworthy as the oldest incorporation of sharks into the prehistoric survivor paradigm (PSP), the interpretation of unknown, contemporary animals as taxa thought extinct. The idea recurred through the 19th century, like Louis Agassiz's prediction that living hybodonts and anacoracids would be dredged from the deep sea (Agassiz, 1871). Those speculations predate explicit discussions of extant *Otodus megalodon* (Greenfield, 2023b), but can be viewed as their progenitors. The connection with the PSP also shows a cyclical relationship between cryptozoology and the monster. Originally, Mitchill was influenced by sea serpent stories when classifying it; then, it was utilized by Piddington to explain analogous sightings. *Hydrarchos* underwent that process when it too was conjectured to have been seen alive (Schleiden, 1847).

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